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# THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

## INDIAN ART IN WOOD AND IVORY.

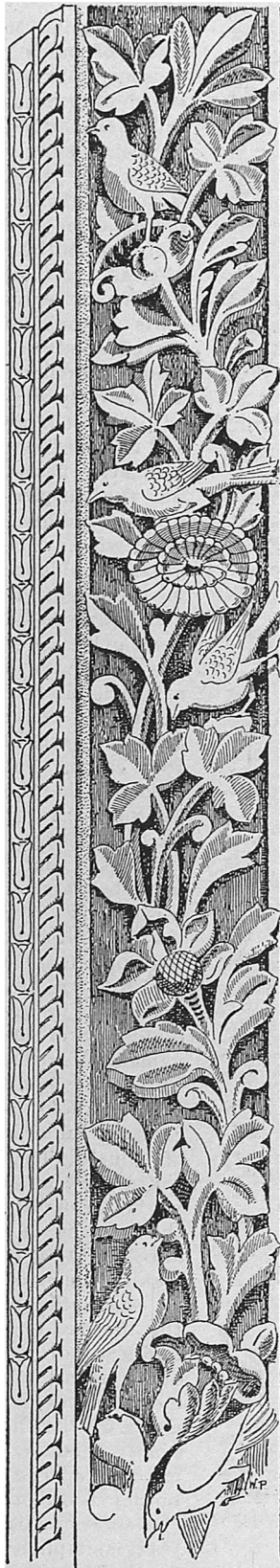


Fig. 1.—Carved Wood Panel from Jeypore.

INDIAN art, while quite as rich in its details as Arabian art, is far more seductive in its outlines, and possesses an invariable quality of repose and variety, resulting from the varied yet even distribution of graceful and richly colored forms, whose effect is of unsurpassable fullness and richness.

Indian art aims more to please the eye than to teach the mind or touch the heart; hence it is of a comparatively low intellectual level. The difference between Mongolian and Indian design is strongly marked. The Japanese goes direct to nature for his details, while the Indian is bound by the precedent set by architectural style, and therefore habitually recurs to architectonic forms as the groundwork of his designs.

The Japanese avoids geometrical symmetry and balance by a thousand unexpected turns of fantasy, while the Aryan designer, by his more geometrical method, arrives at a correctness and dignity that is not to be found in Mongolian productions.

It is not to be supposed that Hindoo art, with all its intricacies of shapes and colors, is purely indigenous. No single art in the world stands, as it were, alone. In Hindoo art we detect to a large extent the evidences of Mohammedan domination, whose ideas the Hindoos accepted and naturalized with great docility. It contains importations from Greek, Japanese, and in particular Persian art. Such is the marvelous dexterity of the Indian art workman and such as is his remarkable talent for assimilation and imitation that foreign decorative ideas are made to assume native Indian forms, and are so cleverly disguised that one would swear they were native inventions. The Indian people are as soft as wax to receive impressions from foreign sources, which they absorb and fuse into harmonious unity, so characteristic of their work.

Since India has belonged to England, the workman, with his taste for imitation, throws himself eagerly on all the models, good or bad presented him by Europeans, and instead of being a creator, he is simply an assiduous copyist.

This fatal faculty of imitation, taken in connection with the decay of Indian religious life, and the passing away or degradation of her native Princes, has, to a large extent, brought about the decay of Indian art. The most original and most

brilliant features of Indian art were the accessories of priestly and feudal systems, now crumbling slowly away. For centuries past, since before the time of Aurungzebe, Indian art has merely followed tradition, and nothing has been innovated. And since India has belonged to England, the introduction of modern and European art in the shape of machine made, worthless and hideous goods, has choked up the tender flower of Indian art, and so art crushed by art withers and dies.

For example, the industry of the Cashmere shawl has been absolutely lost by the introduction of imitation Cashmere shawls from Europe. The Hindoo woman is captivated by the cheapness of machine-made cloth, forgetting that the old Hindoo

cloths used to last her two years, where the machine-made goods only last her two months, and even then the color goes, where the old one used to wash and re-wash without harm or damage.

The lovely *palampores*, or bed covers of India, have been replaced by hideous chintz and cretonnes, with ugly patterns

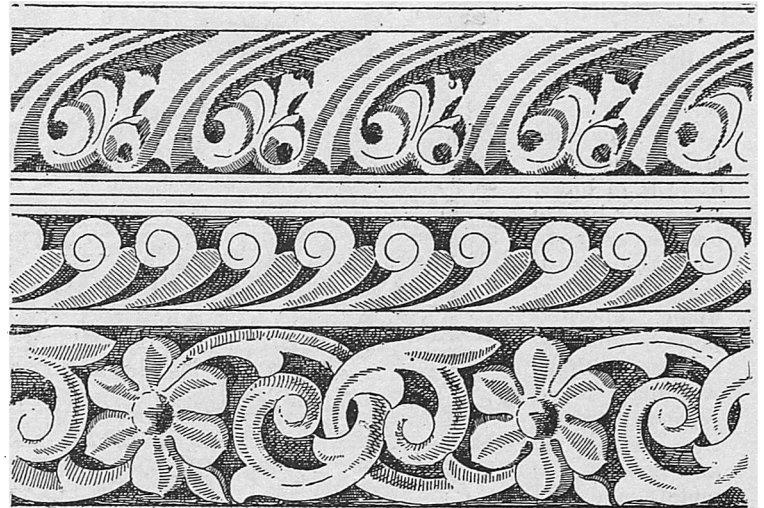


Fig. 2.—Carved Wood Borders.

stamped upon them. The *palampore* of the old days used to be illustrated with religious figures, or pictures of Hindoo warfare, and as many as two hundred blocks of wood were used in one pattern.

Very commonplace English work is shipped to India, because the finest specimens of English work could not be purchased by the poor people of Hindustan. Thus, while the European collector has robbed India of its choicest beauties, he has given India nothing in return but coarse design and vulgar workmanship.

It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that original art in India has well nigh become extinct. Of course, side by side with the imitation of cheap European goods which are fast invading Indian households, there are finer articles manufactured upon models that were made in the sixth century, B. C., which was an original and brilliant, though unfortunately short lived, period in Indian art.

There is in India a still living system of decoration, which inherits its design in direct succession from early days, which is

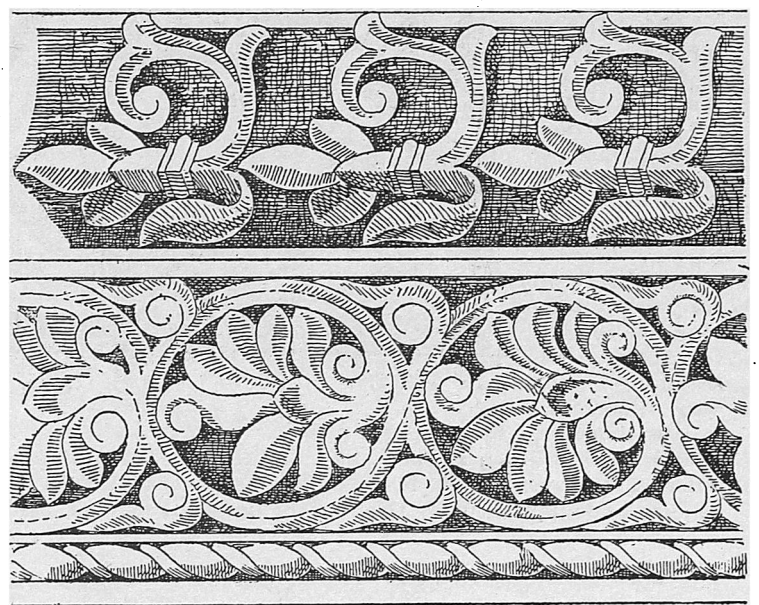


Fig. 3.—Carved Wood Borders.

in perfect unity with the life of the people. To the Indian mind plainness of design is impossible. It is the parrot on the vase or cup that attracts the eye first. In their temples, the doors are covered over with beautifully carved bronze, the chased, or damascened lamps are supported by the finely formed figures

of damsels, or held by the mouths of griffons. Brass images stare at the spectator, and the thousand temple utensils are exquisitely carved, testifying to the religious fervor and practiced talent of the worshiper.

To describe Indian art as applied to laces, carpets, carpentering, cabinet making, jewelry, utensils of brass, copper or bronze caskets, iron-work, the encrusting of one metal upon another, pottery, gold embroidery, shawl weaving, inlay, *repoussé* work, the enameling and carving of metal, and the thousand and one beautiful arts of India, would require a large volume. We have only space at present to glance at Indian art in wood and stone.

In Punjab the tradition of good wood carving still survives. There is nothing in all India to match the picturesque streets of its Northern towns, with their projecting galleries, beautiful balcony windows, and elaborately fretted cornices.

The Indian carvers use chiefly the shasham, the black wood, the cedar, and different kinds of sandalwood. Trees which are intended for carving are the objects of special care, as the trees require to be felled at certain seasons of the year, when the sap is inactive, and are then dried in a special way. Neither the wood of trees which have been struck by thunderbolts, knocked down by elephants, or uprooted by tempests or inundations, are used.

All these precautions are necessary so that the wood is not likely to crack, either in the drying, or after it has been worked.

These conditions assure a very long duration to works of carving in wood, but they are doubly needful when, instead of being simply carved, the wood is to receive an incrustation of ivory or mother-of-pearl.

Fig. 1 represents a panel of carved woodwork from Jeypore. This cleverly carved panel of birds and flowers has a mediæval flavor, but the inspiration is undoubtedly Persian. The great resemblance in the design to European work is an evidence of the fraternity of art, which connects not only different parts of the earth, but links together the present with the past ages.

Figs. 2 and 3 are borders of wood-carving that exhibit that striking feature of Indian art, namely, its redundancy of ornamental forms. The lower band of Fig. 2 is a capital example of much that charms in Indian work. The way the form is balanced, without making the scroll on each side of the flower the duplicate of the other, is uncommonly clever and notable. The small intermediate leaf border is full of character, and yet it is simplicity itself. The upper

border is a further instance of the disposition to work on uncommon lines. The whole of this ornament is designedly out of center, and it lends itself to this particular form all the better

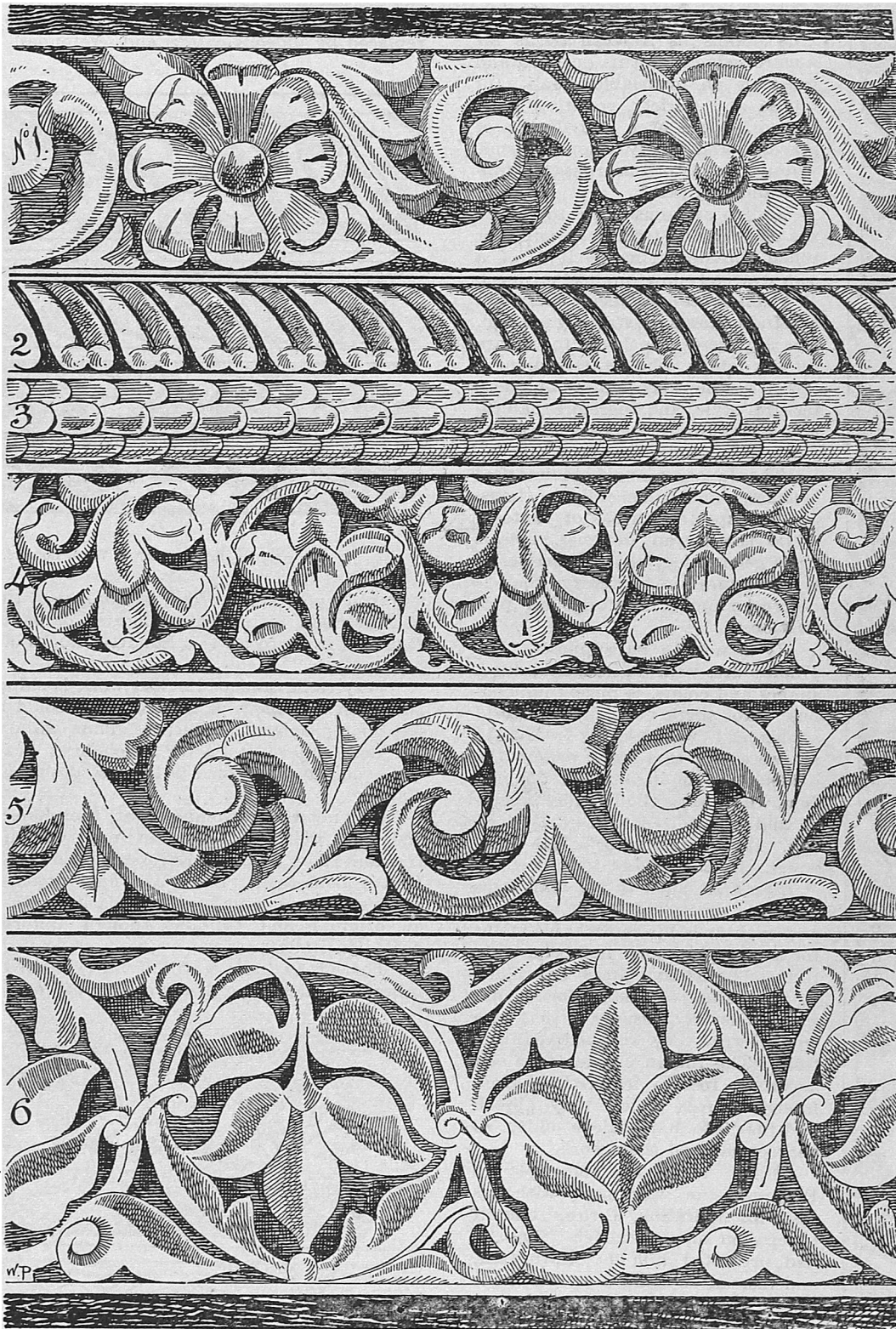


Fig. 4.—Wood Carving from Jeypore.

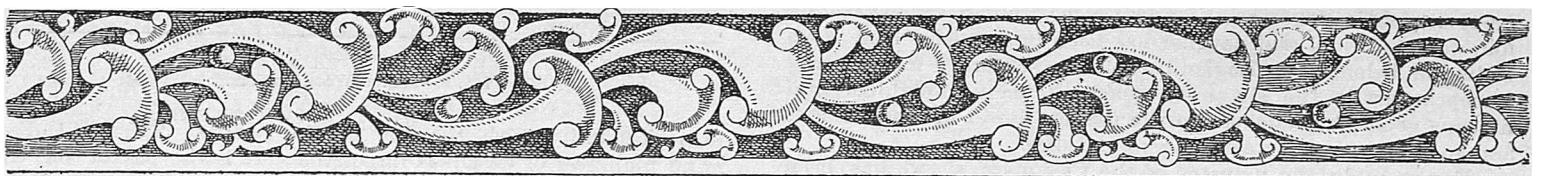


Fig. 5.—Border of Bombay Wood Carving.



for being so. The lower border in Fig. 3 is a palm motive that follows the traditional lines, and in the interlacement there is a strong element of originality in the details of the leaves, which run off into the spandrels formed by the main bands. The upper border is a distinct production. Its elements are very simple, but the form is highly developed and well balanced, giving a pleasing result. The difficulty of ornamenting two unequal spaces is overcome in a remarkably ingenious manner, and a strong sense of balance is maintained in a way that is uncommon with an Eastern artist.

Fig. 4 represents six designs in wood-carving from Jeypore. They are about one-third actual size, and are all part of a rich frieze band, following each other in the relation shown. On the first impulse one would be inclined to say that so much ornament is overloaded with details; but strange as it may appear, there is a general richness of tone produced by the multitude of forms, and the effect is considerably enhanced by the occasional narrow plain band. There does not appear to be any provision for plain spaces, and yet this very excess of ornament is its own antidote, for its abundance serves to produce a rich surface, which, while making no special claim on one's attention, still has interest enough to excite our curiosity, and art enough to repay us for careful study. The forms themselves are well worth notice. There is little in them of pure Indian work, except the method of carving, and this appears to be done by two cuts, which, in section, give something like a V, only not so definite,



Fig. 6.—Open Carved Work from Bombay.

and this is characteristic of most of the foliage. Band No. 1 is clever in the way in which the scrolls flow off from the flower, which preserves the symmetry of the design without working from the center. No. 2 is an instance of the way in which a simple form carefully thought out is made to serve as a foil to the more elaborate ornament about it. No. 3 is distinct from either of the preceding ones, and sustains the richness of quality. No. 4 is very interesting as suggestive of Greek, or Gothic work, in the flow of the lines and the distribution of the leaves. The design is modeled on well-known classic lines, but in the curling-in of the leaf, there is a strong reminiscence of mediæval ornament. No. 5 has an unmistakable flavor of the Renaissance forms. The flow of line is graceful, and the placing out cleverly managed; we are conscious of no gaps or vacant places, and the ornament fills the space naturally, without any forcing. No. 6 is the most unique band of all. The disposition, and the way in which the various leaves fill the space is clever, while the broken line of the leaf is peculiar and original. The manner in which the circles are connected and tied together is very ingenious.

Fig. 5 is an entirely fresh inspiration. It is a piece of Bombay wood carving possessing distinctive marks from any of the

preceding forms. In its elements it is very simple, the trumpet shaped scrolls adorned with volutes being very characteristic of Indian work.

Fig. 6 is an example of open carved work from a bamboo screen, which exhibits the peculiar manner in which the Hindoo carver operates. The scroll forms are cut much in the shape of the letter V. This peculiarity of contour produces a shadow

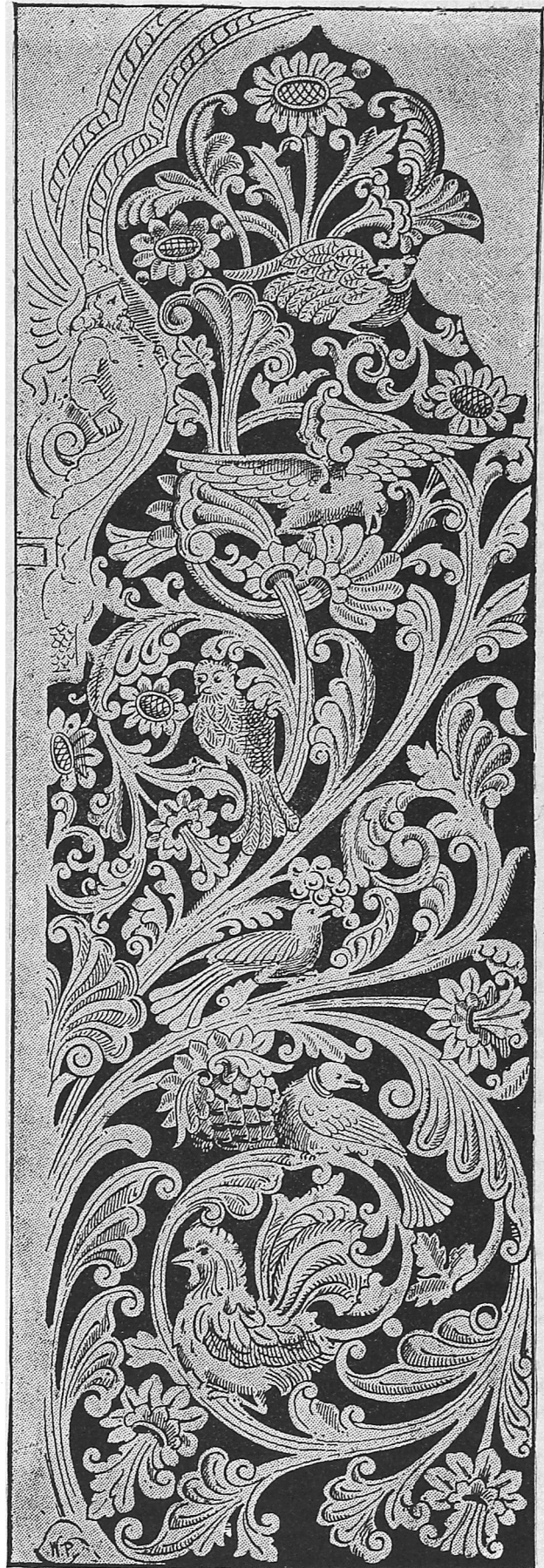


Fig. 7.—Carved Woodwork on Screen Belonging to Bahadur Khanje, Nawa's of Junagarh.

which throws up the relief sharply under the influence of the Eastern sun. This simplicity of detail is much found in the paintings and in the colorings of India. Thus in the coloring and paintings and stuffs, we see that the effect proceeds from the skillful arrangement of colors.

Fig. 7. represents part of the carved woodwork from a screen in the possession of Bahadur Khanje Nawab of Junagaih. The panel illustrated is one of four divided into two and each pair being again separated by the column running up the center, from which the ornament flows on either side. It would be difficult to state the precise inspiration of such work as this, for whilst it is undoubtedly of Indian execution, it carries with it many evidences of European influences, and we might be regarding an example of Dutch Renaissance, instead of Indian work, there being so much in common. But over and above this there are indications of the underlying native influence manifesting itself.

Not only in screen and architectural carvings, but also in thousands of caskets and charming little objects carved in sandal woods and other precious woods are to be seen that degree of perfection the Indian workman can attend to. Articles in sandalwood are manufactured in Mysore, and Bignure and Machure are two towns in high repute for works in carved ebony, and the greatest number of works in black wood come from Anadabad and Dobina.

Inlaid work is a kind of ornamentation which was only imported into India about a century ago, coming originally from Persia, where this work is much in vogue, and is executed by very skillful artisans. The Indian workmen apply the inlay work chiefly to geometrical figures, drawing them so happily and combining them with so much good taste that they produce the best decorative effect.

Fig. 8 is an example of an inlaid ivory screen, which is known as the Kotah screen. This screen is a most beautiful and

decorative object, the inlay work giving the eye great satisfaction from the purity and simplicity of the motive employed. There is a judicious balance maintained between the various portions of the ornament, and the entire design of the screen is so graceful that one lingers before it with admiration and leaves it with regret.

There is no reason why the skill and fancy of the Indian wood carver should not be known abroad by large work suitable for architectural purposes, as well as drawing-room ornaments.

The Indian craftsman can do that which cannot be done any where else under heaven for love or money. Of course his work may not be as beautiful or original as it was in past generations, simply because it is not asked for. He only makes what he knows will sell.

An interesting experiment was tried recently by Mr. Lockwood De Forest, of New York, who during a visit to India organized a band of wood carvers at Ahmedabad, and has imported large quantities of their work for the decoration of American homes.

The application of Indian wood carving to domestic architecture is an interesting question. Balconies, windows, cornices, are ornamented with flowers in rich mouldings, columns and pilasters with a crispness and facility that can only be appreciated by those who have studied this most interesting branch of art, and the ebony and teak of India are magnificent materials with which to execute

the finest work. In our next issue we shall speak of Indian stone work.

We are indebted for the illustrations accompanying this article to the *Journal of Decorative Art*. The art-work itself was exhibited at the Indian Exhibition in London in 1886.

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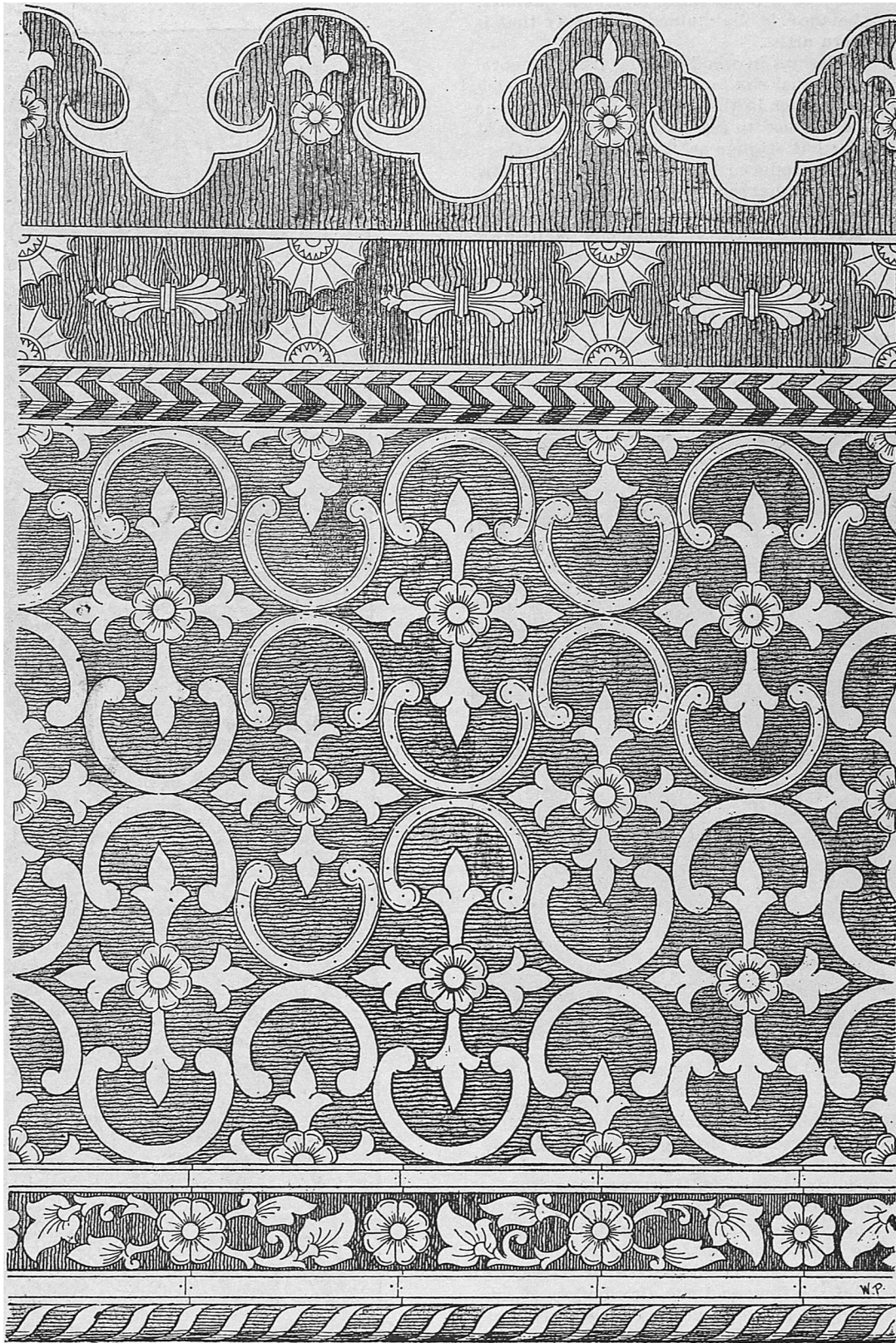


Fig. 8.—Inlaid Ivory Screen.